

## Fieldwork details in the European Social Survey 2002/2003

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# FIELDWORK DETAILS IN THE EUROPEAN SOCIAL SURVEY 2002/2003

*ACHIM KOCH & MICHAEL BLOHM*

## 1 Introduction

The objective of the survey interview is to collect information about the population under study in a uniform and reliable way (Weinberg, 1983: 329ff). For every survey data collection is a critical part of the survey process. In contrast to other parts of this process, like questionnaire development e.g., data collection often is not in the hands of the researcher. In order to implement a face-to-face survey, the researcher usually has to cooperate with a survey organisation, and fieldwork consists of decentralised operations of lots of interviewers. That makes it often difficult to gain insights in what is actually happening in the field. Therefore, fieldwork sometimes has been called to be a “black box”. This assertion holds for a survey in a single country. It holds even more, if we turn to cross-national surveys, where several countries and survey organisations are involved. Here, quite often only aggregate information about issues like the number of interviews realized, the length of the fieldwork period, etc. are available.

The present paper tries to go a step beyond this. It provides more detailed information on several aspects of fieldwork in the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS is a new multi-country biennial survey, which follows very high methodological standards and aims to improve survey methods and documentation of the whole survey process. In the years 2002 and 2003, the first Round of ESS was fielded as a face-to-face survey in 22 European countries.

The paper starts with a brief introduction of the ESS in section 2. In section 3 we provide some basic data on fieldwork in ESS Round 1 (number of achieved interviews, length of fieldwork period, number of interviewers). In section 4 we proceed with information on various more detailed aspects of the work of the interviewers. The main focus is on the actual interviewing task of the interviewers, in particular the temporal aspects of their

work.<sup>1</sup> The issues analysed include the average number of interviews realized per day; the day and time when interviews are made; the length of the start-up phase until interviewers do complete their first interview; and the length of the time period interviewers are actually engaged in realizing interviews. With this information available, we can detect characteristic differences and similarities in the work of the interviewers across countries. Do these reported fieldwork details matter? In section 5 we do some exemplary correlational analyses. First, we examine whether there is a relationship between the fieldwork details described and the length of the fieldwork period in the ESS countries. Second, we investigate, whether there is a correlation between the timing of the interviews and data quality, concrete: the degree of underrepresentation of people in paid work in the realized sample. In the conclusions in section 6 the need to replicate these analyses with other data sets is emphasized.

## **2 The European Social Survey**

The European Social Survey (ESS) is a new multi-country biennial survey with two main aims (for more details, see <http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/>). First, it seeks to measure, monitor and interpret changing public attitudes within Europe and the way in which they interact with Europe's changing institutions. Second, it seeks to advance and consolidate improved methods of cross-national quantitative measurement within Europe and beyond.

The project is directed by a Central Coordinating Team, led by the Centre for Comparative Social Surveys at City University, London. In each participating country, a National Coordinator is responsible for the conduct of the national survey to a common standard. The work of the central team is mainly funded by the European commission, whereas the fieldwork and other national costs in each country were to be borne by national funding agencies.

The first round of ESS was fielded in the years 2002/2003 in 22 nations. The questionnaire contained several broad topics, like public trust in government and politicians, political interest and participation, socio-political orientations, moral and social values, national, ethnic and religious allegiances, well-being, health and security, and information on social structure. The average interview length was around 70 minutes.

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1 We do not cover the tasks of contacting and motivating target persons to participate, and we do not deal with issues like achieved response rates, non-contact and refusal rates in ESS Round 1 (see e.g. Philippens & Billiet, 2004).

A standard specification for all participating countries established the methods and procedures that had to be followed. The specification covered a wide range of issues from sampling, questionnaire design, event and context measuring, translation, fieldwork standards, response rates and archiving. For instance, it was laid down that all countries had to use strict random sampling methods, and that no substitution of ‘non-contacts’ or ‘refusals’ was permitted. The population should consist of all persons aged 15 and over resident within private households. A target response rate of at least 70% should be aimed at. The fieldwork should last for at least one month within a four-month period between 1 September and end December 2002. All interviews had to be carried out face-to-face. The interviewers had to be trained in face-to-face briefing sessions, and the interviewer workload was strictly limited. These specifications aimed to ensure that the most rigorous methodologies were used in the countries and to secure consistency and comparability of the resulting data. Adherence to them was a requirement for a countries’ data to be included in the integrated ESS dataset.

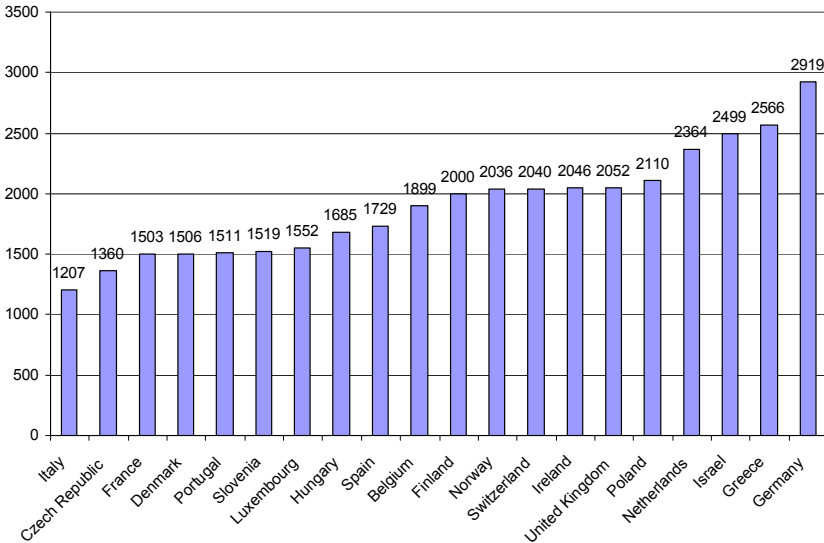
The following sections provide some insights on how the countries actually implemented data collection in ESS Round 1. Our analyses cover 20 of the 22 countries participating in the first Round of ESS. Austria and Sweden are not included, since both countries did not provide an interviewer identification number in their data sets.

### **3 Basic Information on Fieldwork in ESS Round 1**

#### **3.1 Number of achieved interviews**

The “Specifications for participating countries” in ESS Round 1 set down a minimum sample size of 2,000 interviews in each country. Countries with populations of under two million were required to achieve at least 1,000 interviews. In Round 1, this applied only to Slovenia and Luxembourg.

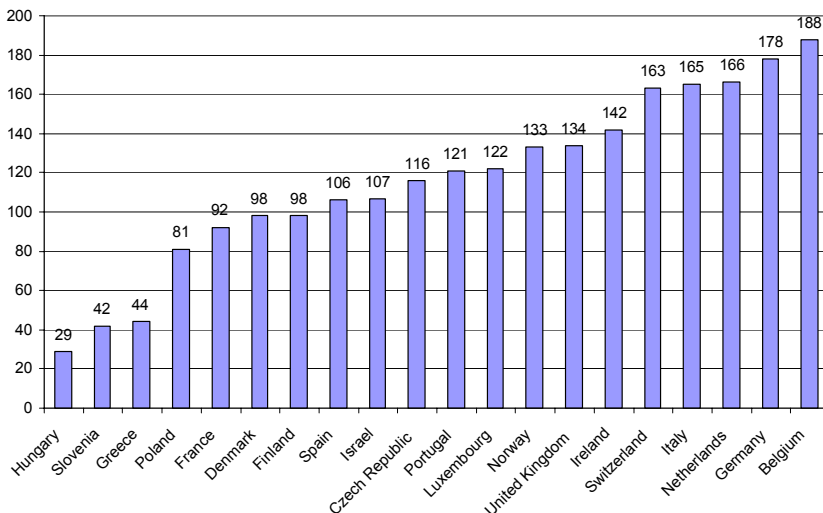
Twelve of the 20 countries met the sample size requirement (see Figure 1). Most interviews were made in Germany (2,919 interviews). Eight countries did not achieve the required number of interviews. In some countries the sample size was lower because of budgetary constraints, in other countries low response rates brought the number of interviews below 2,000. On average, 1,905 interviews were realized per country.

**Figure 1** Number of achieved interviews in ESS Round 1

### 3.2 Length of fieldwork period

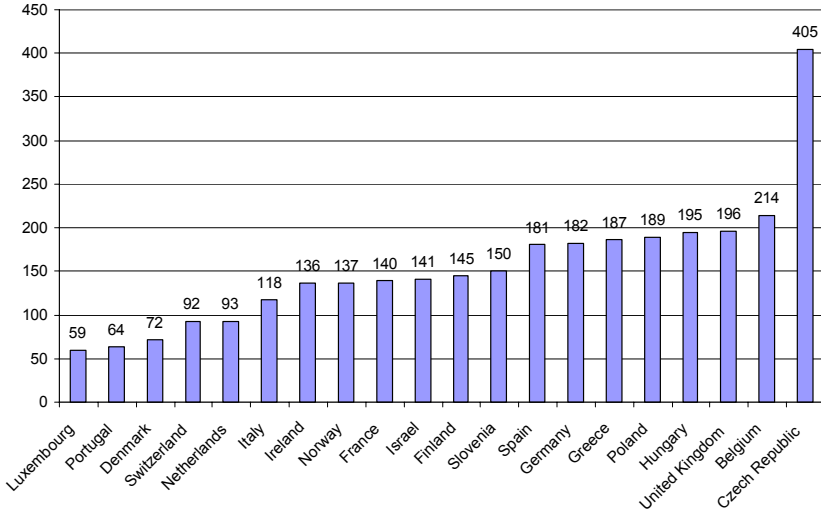
According to the “Specifications for participating countries” fieldwork in ESS Round 1 should last for at least one month within a four-months period from September to December 2002. The actual length of the fieldwork period in the countries of ESS Round 1 varied between one and somewhat more than six months (see Figure 2).<sup>2</sup> Averaging across all 20 countries the fieldwork lasted 116 days. On the one hand there were three countries with a rather short fieldwork period: In Hungary, Slovenia, and Greece fieldwork was finalized within one and one and a half month, respectively. On the other hand eight countries exceeded the required maximum fieldwork length of four months. The longest fieldwork period pertained to Germany and Belgium, where around six months were necessary.

2 With respect to the start date of fieldwork even greater variations did occur: Seven countries managed to get under way in September 2002, and another nine countries began in the course of the remaining months of 2002. Four countries started fieldwork in 2003, the last country commenced in September 2003. Difficulties in receiving the necessary national funding were the primary reason for these delays.

**Figure 2** Length of fieldwork period in ESS Round 1 (in days)

### 3.3 Number of interviewers and number of interviews per interviewer

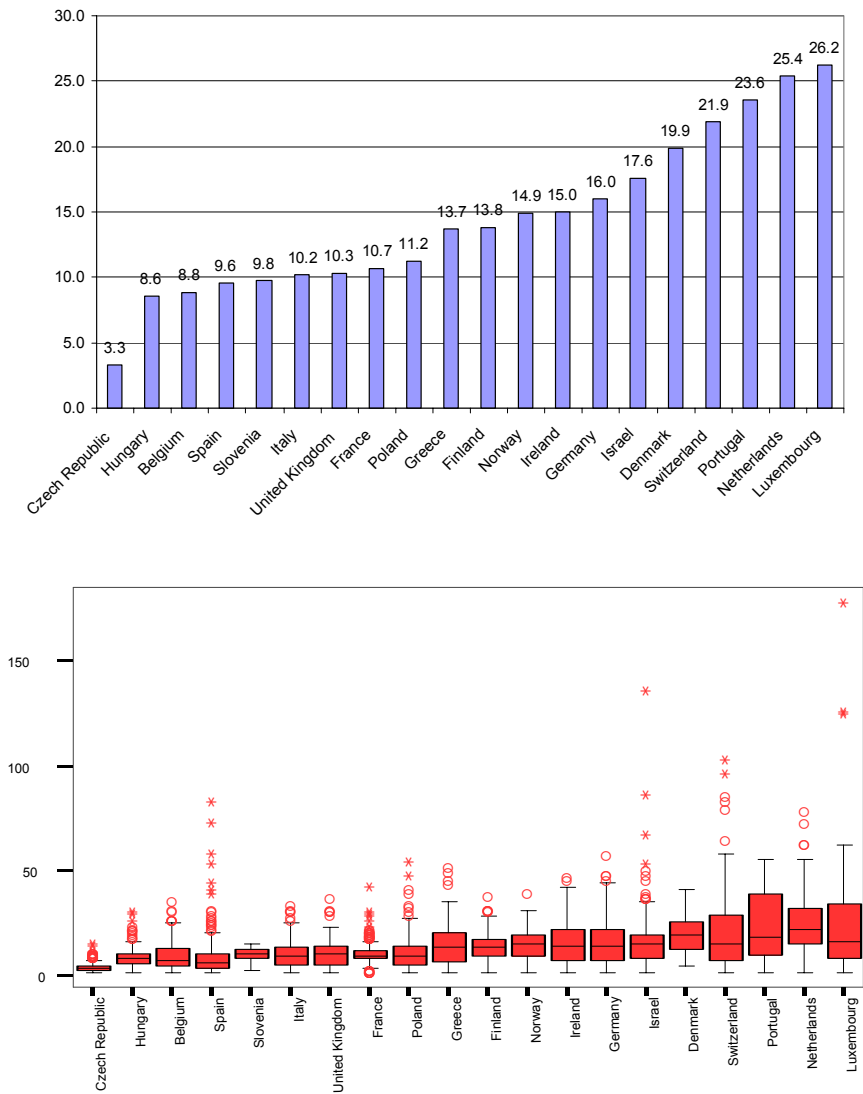
How many interviewers were involved in fieldwork for ESS Round 1? In the “Specifications for participating countries” there was no explicit requirement with regard to the number of interviewers to be deployed. Figure 3 shows, that the number of interviewers used for fieldwork in ESS 1 varied between a low of about 60 to a high of 405. On average, 155 interviewers were involved in each country. Most countries deployed between around 140 to 200 interviewers. Only one country used much more than 200 interviewers: the Czech Republic with 405 interviewers. Fewest interviewers were deployed in Luxembourg (59 interviewers) and Portugal (64 interviewers).

**Figure 3** Number of interviewers in ESS Round 1

In determining the number of interviewers to be deployed for a study various issues play a role: The total number of interviews to be realized, the average time needed to realize an interview, the planned length of the fieldwork period, the geographical distribution of the target persons, the availability and location of the interviewers (where do they live in relation to the respondents?), the complexity of the study and the resulting needs for (personal) interviewer training,<sup>3</sup> just to name a few of them.

3 Probably it did not happen by chance that in ESS Round 1 Czech Republic was the only country in which the interviewers were not personally briefed, since the personal briefing of all 405 interviewers would have been very expensive.

**Figure 4** Number of interviews per interviewer in ESS Round 1 (means and boxplots of distribution)





From a methodological point of view one should keep the number of interviewers high and the average workload of the interviewers as low as possible in order to reduce the possibility of interviewer effects. "...When interviewers affect the answers they get, the impact on estimates of standard errors is directly related to the average number of interviews per interviewer" (Groves et al., 2004: 296). Using more interviewers on a particular study, and having them each take fewer interviews, is a way to reduce this effect. On the other hand one has to recognize that the interviewer workload should not be too small in order to be able to organize fieldwork efficiently. The interviewers need to do a couple of interviews to become familiar with the survey instrument; training efforts are only cost efficient, when interviewers complete at least a certain number of interviews.

In the "Specifications for participating countries" in ESS Round 1 a rule was formulated that no single interviewer should work on more than 48 individuals, households, or addresses (gross). That meant, that an interviewer should be allowed to realize 48 interviews at most (net). As can be seen in Figure 4 the average number of completed interviews per interviewer was well below this level. Across all countries, 15 interviews were completed on average, but there was some variation between countries. The interviewer workload was highest in the Netherlands and Luxembourg with an average number of 25 and 26 completed interviews. The lowest workload is observed in Czech Republic with three completed interviews on average. The boxplots in Figure 4 reveal, that in several countries some interviewers exceeded the allowed limit of 48 completed interviews. In the maximum, an interviewer in Luxembourg took 178 interviews – these add up to 11% of all interviews realized in that country.

After having provided information on these basic fieldwork issues, we will now turn to some more detailed and less commonly used indicators of fieldwork patterns (see e.g. Koch, 2002; Schnell, 1997: 229ff).

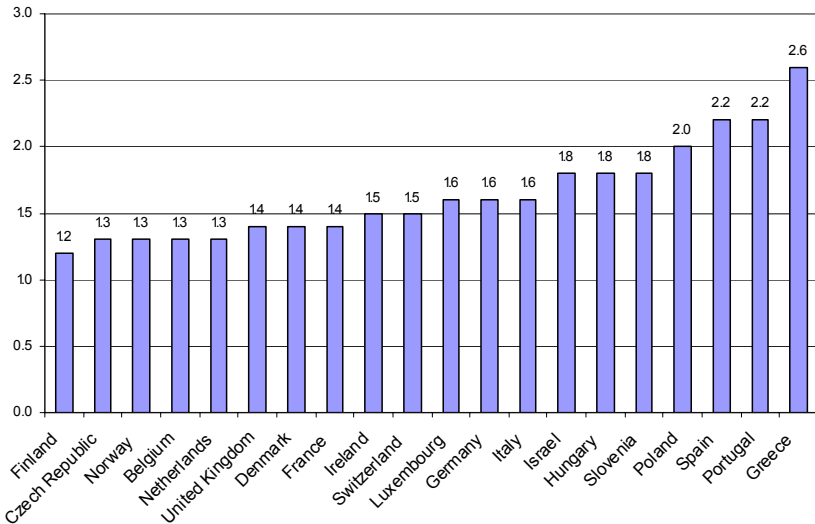
## **4 Fieldwork Details in ESS Round 1**

### **4.1 Number of interviews per day per interviewer**

When interviewers are working for a study like the ESS, how many interviews do they usually realize per day? Several factors will have an impact on this. First and foremost, this will depend on the time budget the interviewers devote to the interviewing task. It is

probably safe to say, that interviewing is most-often a part-time job. This limits the number of interviews to be completed on a single day. Besides the interviewer’s time budget, the length of the interview,<sup>4</sup> the travelling time needed to get to the home of the target persons, and the accessibility of the sample respondents (that means their at-home-patterns and their willingness to agree with the survey request) can have an influence on the number of interviews realized per day.

**Figure 5 Average number of interviews per day per interviewer in ESS Round 1**

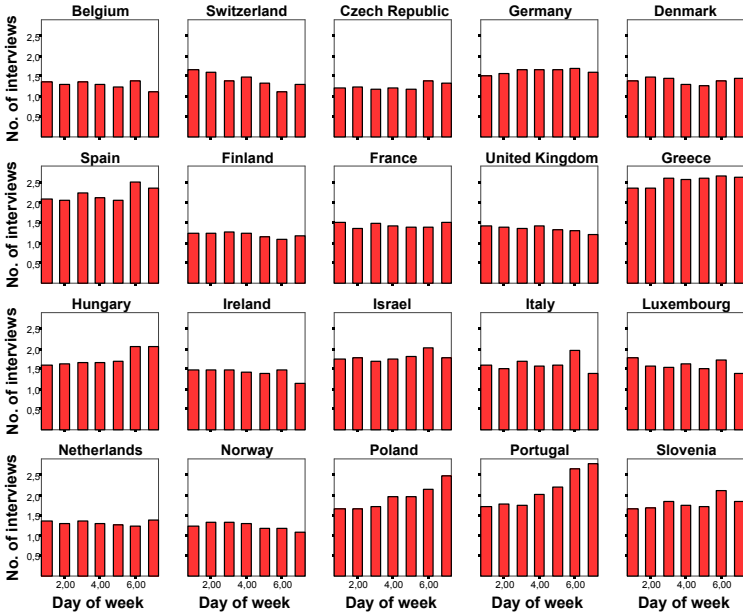


4 In ESS Round 1 the average interview length added up to 63 minutes, with some variation across countries. The shortest length was observed in Italy and Spain with 53 minutes. The interview lasted longest in Poland with 70 minutes on average. Since the additional supplementary questionnaire took around 10 minutes to be filled in, the “pure” interview time needed for a single interview amounted to about 75 minutes on average. Obviously, the ESS was not a short interview. If, for instance, an interviewer was working only in the evening, it depended on the travelling time needed to get from one target person to another whether one or two interviews were feasible at the same day.

In ESS Round 1, the interviewers completed on average 1.6 interviews per day. In 65% of the 23947 days at which interviewers were successfully working for ESS only one interview was realized. In another 22% of days two interviews were made. And in 13% of all interview days, three or more interviews were completed. There is some variation in this across countries (see Figure 5). The lowest figures are obtained for Finland (with an average of 1.2 interviews), Belgium, Czech Republic, the Netherlands, and Norway (1.3 interviews). In four countries, two or more interviews have been completed on average. These are Poland (2.0 interviews), Portugal and Spain with 2.2 interviews, and Greece (2.6 interviews). The figure for Greece is probably somewhat exaggerated, because – according to the Greek National Coordinator – in a few cases two interviewers were working under the same interviewer identification number.

Obviously, interviewing for ESS Round 1 was not a full-time job for the interviewers. This holds, even if we take into account, that a 75 minutes face-to-face interview takes more interviewer time, particularly because of the travelling time needed (Weinberg, 1983: 336f). When we look at the results separately for the different days of the week we find some variation between weekdays and weekends in a few countries. In particular in Hungary, Poland, and Portugal, the average number of completed interviews is higher on weekends than on weekdays (by 0.4 to 0.8 interviews, see Figure 6). Switzerland is showing the reverse pattern. Here, the average number of completed interviews per day is 0.3 lower on weekends compared to weekdays.

**Figure 6 Average number of interviews per day per interviewer, separately for different days of the week, ESS Round 1\***



\* Very small sample sizes ( $n < 30$ ) were observed for 'Sunday interviews' in Finland ( $n=27$ ), France ( $n=4$ ), Netherlands ( $n=10$ ), Norway ( $n=23$ ), Switzerland ( $n=17$ ).

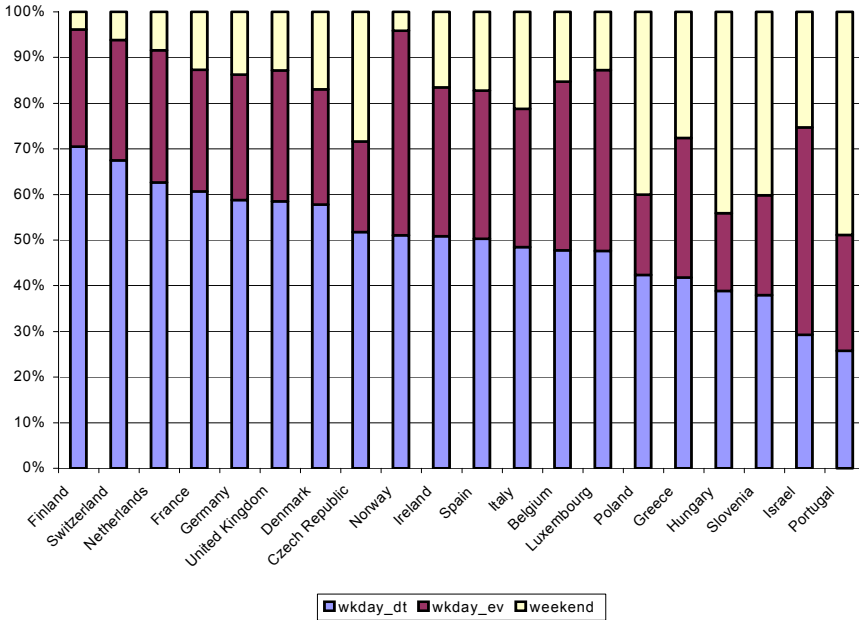
**4.2 Time and day of interviews**

When do the interviewers take their interviews? Are there specific times of the day and/or specific days of the week which are particularly important for interviewing? In the "Specifications for participating countries", recommendations were given regarding the number, mode and timing of call attempts. At least four personal call attempts should be made at every sample unit. At least one of these call attempts should be made in the evening and one at the weekend. The call attempts should be spread over at least 14 days.

But, in contrast, there was no explicit requirement regarding the timing of the interviews. Common sense would expect that in a survey of the general population like the ESS a considerable part of the work should be made in the evening or at weekends in order to interview those who are at work during the day.

When we define all interviews starting at 5 pm or later as evening interviews we obtain the results shown in Figure 7. On average across all countries 50% of the ESS interviews were realized on weekday morning or afternoon. 29% of the interviews were completed on weekday evening and 21% on weekends.

**Figure 7 Day and time of interviews in ESS Round 1 (in %)**



In Finland and Switzerland more than two thirds of all interviews were realized during weekday daytime.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, in Israel and Portugal less than 30% of all interviews were completed at weekday morning or afternoon. In Israel, Norway, and Luxembourg a lot of interviews were made in the evening (40% to 46%). In Portugal, Hungary, Slovenia, and Poland between 40% and 49% of all interviews were taken on the weekend. So, only in every second country participating in ESS Round 1 the majority of interviews was realized in the evenings or on weekends, i.e. at times which seem to be most productive for household interviewing.

We know too little to draw firm conclusions about the reasons for these differences across countries. One might speculate whether the employment conditions of the interviewers play a role. In the Scandinavian countries, for instance, the respective National Statistical Agency was in charge of doing the fieldwork for ESS. In these cases the interviewers were regular employees of the survey organization. Maybe this is the reason for the low proportion of interviews taken on the weekend.<sup>6</sup> The same factor may account for the rather low weekend figures in the Netherlands and Luxembourg (8% and 13%), too. In contrast, high figures for weekend interviews may result from the fact that in some countries working as an interviewer is a second job in addition to being fulltime employed at another job. So, a lot of the interviewing work has to be done on weekends.

Alternatively, the particular distribution of interviewing times in a country could result from a specific call schedule the survey organisation had implemented for ESS. According to the information in the National Technical Summaries, the interviewers in Poland and Slovenia, for instance, were required to make two contact attempts at weekends (instead of only one as prescribed by the Specifications). Both countries exhibit a high proportion of weekend interviews. In both countries, and in Israel, too, in addition two visits (instead of one) were required to be made in the evening. But with respect to the proportion of weekday evening interviews, only Israel shows a result above average.

### **4.3 Start-up phase until interviewers complete their first interview**

After the official start of fieldwork it usually takes some days until the interviewers actually realize their first interview. Once they have received their fieldwork assignments and the study materials, like questionnaires, showcards, brochures, and contact forms, the

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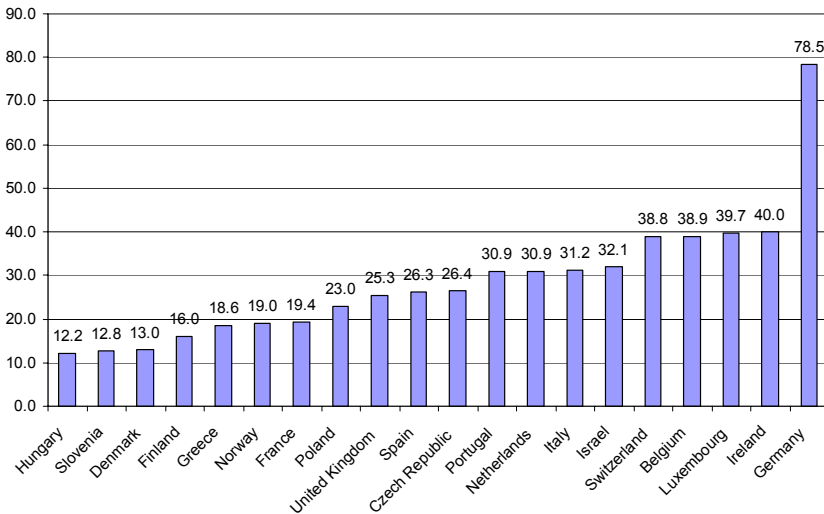
5 An even higher figure is obtained for Sweden, which is not included in our analyses: Here, 77 % of all interviews were made on weekday morning or afternoon.

6 Sweden showed an even lower figure: only 1.3% of all interviews were made on the weekend.

interviewers can begin to work. First of all they have to locate the sampled addresses and to plan the order of their visits to minimize travelling. Subsequently, they can try to contact the target persons, in order to realize their first interview or to get at least an appointment for an interview. In ESS Round 1, the interviewers completed their first interview on average four weeks after fieldwork had started.

Some countries are well below this average (see Figure 8). In Hungary, Slovenia and Denmark the interviewers realized their first interview on average 12 respectively 13 days after the start of fieldwork. On the other hand there are five countries in which it took more than five weeks until the interviewers realized their first interview. In Switzerland, Belgium, Luxembourg, and Ireland around 40 days were needed. In Germany even 80 days went by until the first interview was completed.

**Figure 8 Average number of days until interviewers completed their first interview in ESS Round 1**



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As a matter of course, these very long time spans until the completion of the first interview cannot be explained by the usual start-up phase of a survey. Unfortunately, it is not totally uncommon in survey practice that at the start of fieldwork for a survey not enough interviewers are available. Sometimes, a survey organisation does not have enough interviewers at all, or the interviewers are deployed at another study.<sup>7</sup> So, it may happen, that some of the interviewers do receive the study materials and the addresses they have to work on not at the very beginning of fieldwork but sometime later on. In other cases, it can occur, that interviewers are available in theory, and all the sample addresses were allocated to them, but the interviewers decide by themselves to start later – for instance, because they put higher priority on a more attractive study from another survey organisation they are working for. Independent from the particular reasons which applied, it is certainly safe to say that according to our results for ESS Round 1 there are still opportunities to speed up the actual start of fieldwork in several countries.

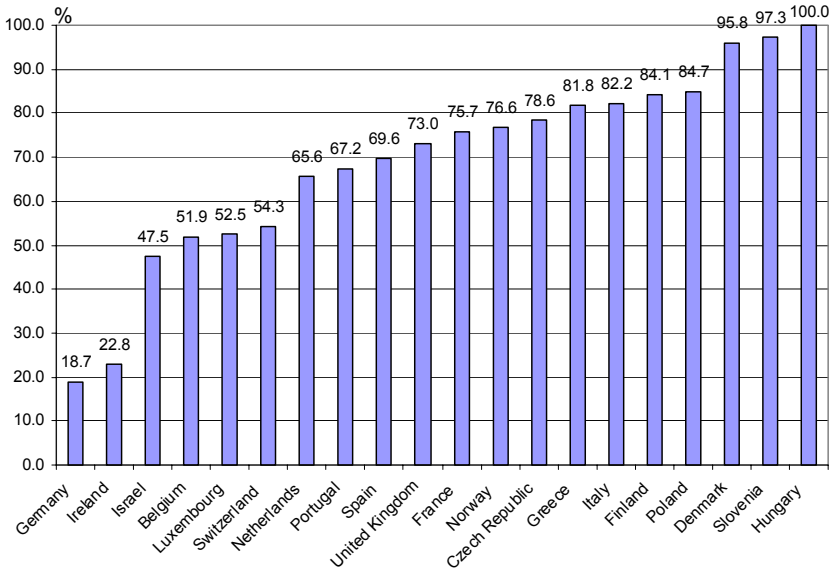
In a different approach we can look at the proportion of interviewers who started their work within four weeks after the official start date of fieldwork (see Figure 9). In this approach outliers (i.e. very late starters) do not affect the results. The picture we get is very similar to the previous results. In three countries all or nearly all (95% or more) interviewers realized at least one interview during the first four weeks. These are Denmark, Hungary and Slovenia – the same three countries which also scored low on the average rate. In several countries only about half of the interviewers got started in the first four weeks: This is the case in Israel, Belgium, Luxembourg and Switzerland. Even lower is the proportion in Ireland and Germany. Here, only every fifth interviewer started to work successfully during the first four weeks of fieldwork.

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7 We know, for instance, that the result for Germany is at least partly attributable to the deliberate decision to start fieldwork only with a few interviewers because the majority of interviewers was still working on a different project.



**Figure 9 Percentage of interviewers with at least one completed interview within four weeks after start of fieldwork, ESS Round 1**



#### 4.4 Average length of fieldwork period on level of interviewers

Now, let us have a look at the working period of the interviewers, i.e. the time span between the date of the first and the date of the last interview of an interviewer. As a matter of course, it is possible that interviewers attempt to contact target persons before or after these dates. So, our indicator may somewhat underestimate the actual working period of the interviewers. Nevertheless our approach gives a good indication of the average interviewer working period, in particular, since we are mainly interested in comparing the results across countries.

**Figure 10 Average length of fieldwork period on level of interviewers in ESS Round 1 (in days)**

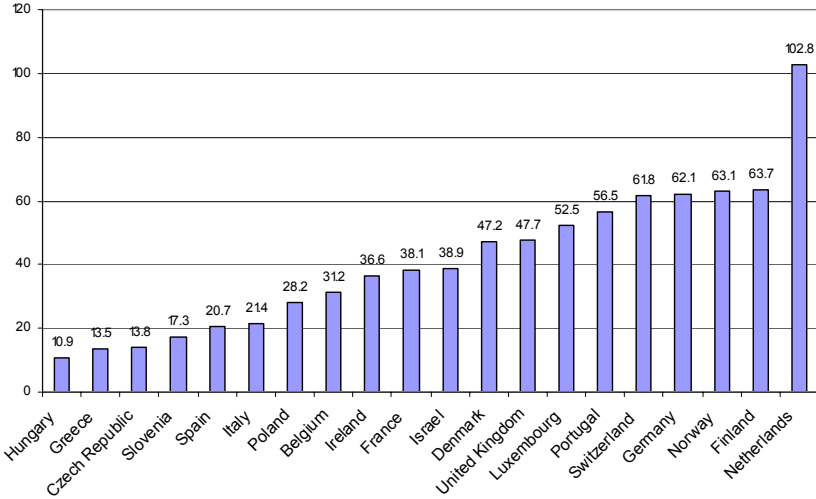


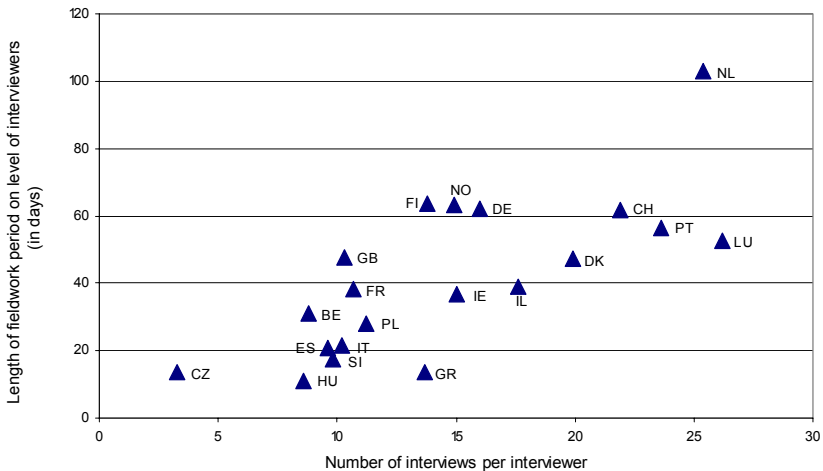
Figure 10 exhibits great differences in the length of the interviewers' working period across countries. In ESS Round 1 the average fieldwork period for the interviewers varies from a low of 11 days in Hungary to a high of 103 days in the Netherlands. The mean is 41 days across all countries.

As can be observed in Figure 11, the average number of days between the first and the last interview depends heavily on the average workload of the interviewers. The more interviews the interviewers had to make in a country, the longer the time period between first and last interview is ( $r=.74$ ,  $n=20$ ). But, still we find that even between countries with roughly the same average interviewer workload great differences do exist. In the two countries with the highest average interviewer workload for example – the Netherlands

and Luxembourg –, the fieldwork period of the interviewers is twice as high in the Netherlands as in Luxembourg. This outstanding high figure certainly has to do with the intensive (and successful) refusal conversion efforts which took place in the Netherlands (Philippens & Billiet, 2004).

On the other hand, there are two countries which exhibit a particular short effective fieldwork period compared to the other countries with equivalent interviewer workloads. These are Hungary (9 interviews in 11 days) and Greece (14 interviews in 14 days). One could doubt whether such a short average working period is long enough to allow for repeated contact attempts with people who are difficult to reach or difficult to persuade. But, in view of the high response rates which were achieved in both countries (70% and 80%, respectively), this did not seem to cause any real problems.

**Figure 11 Average length of fieldwork period on level of interviewers (in days) and average number of completed interviews per interviewer, ESS Round 1**



In general, the interviewers' working period is usually noticeably shorter than the whole fieldwork period in a country (see Figure 12). While the total fielding period varied between one to six months (29 to 188 days) across the 20 countries, the interviewers working period varied between 11 and 103 days on average. This means that knowing that a survey had a certain fieldwork period in a country must not be misinterpreted that all the interviewers were working for the survey all that time. In ESS Round 1 the average working period of the interviewers represents about 12%/13% (Czech Republic / Italy<sup>8</sup>) to 62%/65% (Netherlands / Finland) of the total fielding period<sup>9</sup> For the average interviewer, the working period for the survey therefore was usually much shorter than the total fielding time.

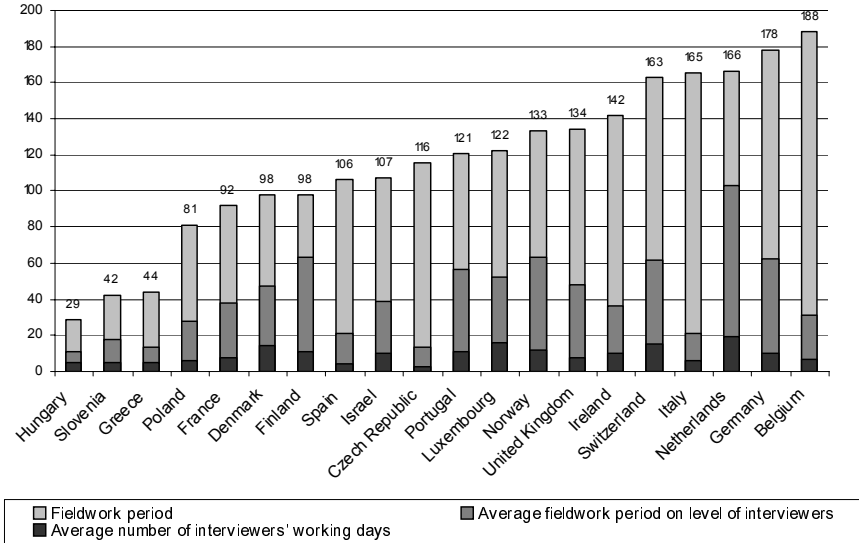
This assertion holds even more, when we examine the average number of days at which the interviewers were taking interviews. The average number of (successful) working days for ESS Round 1 varies between three days in the Czech Republic and 19 days in the Netherlands. If we divide the average working period of the interviewers by the number of days at which the interviewers were completing interviews, we find that – across all countries – the interviewers were taking interviews every fourth day. The range goes from interviewing on average every second day in Hungary to interviewing on average every sixth day in Finland, Germany, and United Kingdom.

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8 Italy seems to be a special case. Here, the fielding period comprised 165 days, but during week 10 to week 22 of the fieldwork period no interview at all was completed.

9 The higher the average number of interviews per interviewer, the higher the ratio of the average interviewers working period and the total fielding period ( $r=.61$ ,  $n=20$ ).

**Figure 12 Length of fieldwork period, average length of fieldwork period on level of interviewers, and average number of interviewers' working days, ESS Round 1 (in days)**



These results suggest the same conclusion as already drawn regarding the length of the start-up phase of interviewers: at least in principle, possibilities to reduce the fielding period seem to exist in several countries. The concrete possibilities will of course depend on the specific situation in a country. Countries, where the total fieldwork period was rather long in comparison to the average working period of the interviewers, could check for instance, whether some reduction in fielding time could be achieved by a more efficient, i.e. more simultaneous deployment of interviewers. Countries, where the number of working days of the interviewers was rather small in comparison to their average working period, could check whether the time span between the working days of the interviewers could be reduced. But, this recommendation does not mean that interviewers' working period should be reduced at any price. Of course, the interviewers still must have enough time to carry out all the procedures that are needed to obtain optimal response rates.

## **5 Correlates of Fieldwork Details – Two Examples**

### **5.1 Fieldwork details and length of fieldwork period**

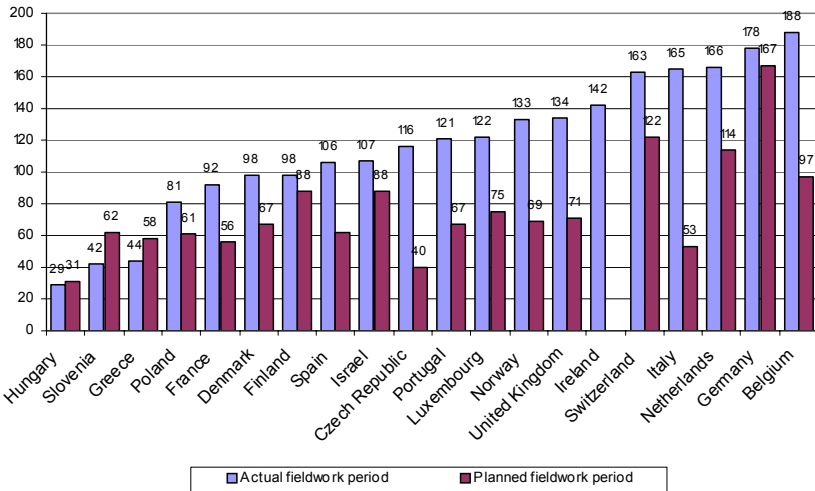
In cross-national surveys the parallel fielding of the survey in all participating countries is important, both for reasons of data comparability and for reasons of an effective management of the survey project. Since responses to survey questions can be affected by external events, it is prudent to strive for a fieldwork period being as parallel as possible in the participating countries. In ESS Round 1, for instance, the war in Iraq may have had a differential influence in different countries, depending on the timing of fieldwork (before, during and after the war). And with respect to the management of a cross-national survey, one has to be aware, that quite often a delay in data availability for one country can cause a delay of data delivery for the whole project, or it can require several data releases until all countries are included. In order to achieve simultaneous fielding periods in a multi-country survey, similar start dates and similar lengths of the data collection period in all participating countries are vital. In the present section we will deal with the latter issue in the context of ESS Round 1.

As a matter of course, a certain length of the fielding period cannot be legislated for. The length of the data collection period of a survey has to be planned and agreed upon with the survey organisation selected. The survey organisation has to define the necessary resources (personnel, laptops, etc.) and has to coordinate their availability with the needs of other studies the organisation is in charge of. The estimated length of the fieldwork period should be realistic, taking into account both the requirements of the given study (number of cases, availability and cooperativeness of targeted population, targeted response rate, etc.) and the resources available (number of interviewers to be deployed, their time budgets, available tools for fieldwork management, etc.).

In ESS Round 1, the Specifications laid down that the main fieldwork period should last at least one month within a four-month period in each country. A minimum length of one month was defined, in order to avoid that truncated fieldwork periods lead to a high proportion of non-contacts. A maximum of up to four months was thought to be sufficient to allow for repeated contact attempts at persons who are difficult to reach or difficult to persuade to participate.

As can be seen in Figure 13 nearly all countries deemed a fieldwork length between one and four months to be sufficient. The only exception was Germany with a planned length of 5,5 months.<sup>10</sup> On average, the countries expected a fieldwork length of 76 days.

**Figure 13 Actual and planned length of fieldwork period in ESS Round 1 (in days)\***



\*No information on length of planned fielding period available for Ireland

It turned out that the actual data collection overran its time. On average, fieldwork lasted 116 days in the 20 countries. There is no relationship between the expected length of fieldwork and the time span the fieldwork took longer than planned ( $r=-.05$ ,  $n=19$ ). In two countries, Slovenia and Greece, the actual fieldwork period was three respectively two weeks shorter than planned. In Hungary, actual and planned length were virtually identical. In all the other countries fieldwork took longer than expected, by ten (Finland) to 112 days (Italy). As a result, the actual fieldwork length varied between 29 (Hungary) and 188 (Belgium) days across all countries.

10 The reason for that was, that Germany intended to start fieldwork at a particular time, when only a few interviewers were available because the majority of interviewers was still working on a different project.

In the following we will analyse whether these differences in the length of the fieldwork period can at least partly be explained by differences in the fieldwork patterns we described in the previous sections. A first hypothesis might be that the differences are related to differences in the sample size across countries. But, empirically we find only a weak correlation between the sample size and the length of the data collection period ( $r=.18$ , see Table 1). The relationship between the length of the fieldwork period and the number of interviewers deployed is even lower in size ( $r=-.12$ ). Among the basic fieldwork parameters, the average number of realized interviews per interviewer shows the strongest correlation with the length of the fieldwork period ( $r=.28$ ).

**Table 1** Correlation between length of fieldwork period and selected fieldwork patterns (Pearson's  $r$ ,  $n=20$  countries, ESS Round 1)

	Pearson's $r$
<i>Basic information on fieldwork</i>	
Number of achieved interviews	.18
Number of interviewers	-.12
Average number of achieved interviews per interviewer	.28
<i>Fieldwork details</i>	
Average number of interviews per day per interviewer	-.51
Percentage of interviews made on weekday daytime	.39
Percentage of interviews made on weekday evening	.40
Percentage of interviews made on weekends	-.58
Average number of days until interviewers completed their first interview	.70
Average length of interviewers' working period (in days)	.55

The situation looks somewhat different when we turn to the more detailed aspects of fieldwork. For all these variables, the correlation with the length of the fieldwork period is higher than for the basic fieldwork parameters. The higher the average number of interviews per interviewer per day in a country, the shorter is the fieldwork period in that



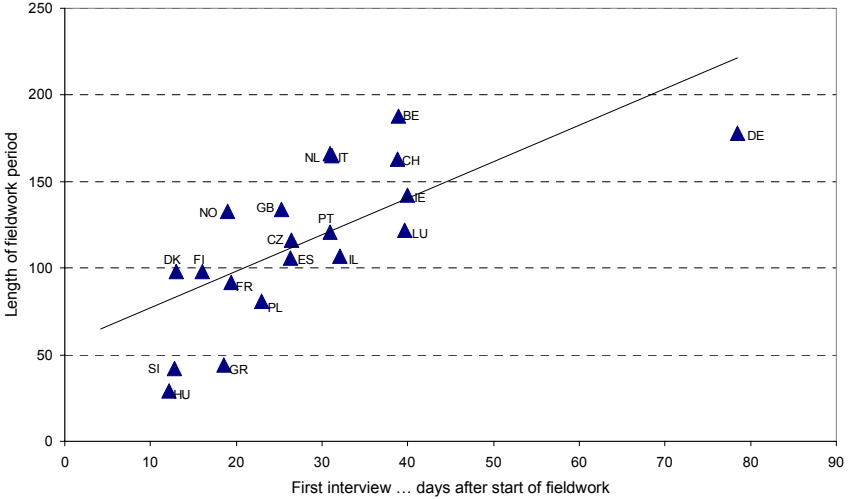
country ( $r=-.51$ , see Table 1). The same holds for the percentage of weekend interviews. Countries with a high percentage of weekend interviews exhibit shorter fieldwork periods than countries with a low percentage of weekend interviews ( $r=-.58$ ). Both variables can be taken as indicators for the intensity of fieldwork: If interviewers complete a high number of interviews per day, and/or hold down their job not (only) on weekdays but (also) on weekends this can help to shorten the fieldwork period.

That a late start of fieldwork will lengthen the whole fieldwork period is in the nature of things. The correlation between the average start day of the interviewers and the length of the fieldwork period in all countries is  $r=.70$ . Also it comes by no surprise, that there is a relationship between the length of the interviewers' working period and the total length of the fieldwork period ( $r=.55$ ). Interestingly enough, this correlation is smaller than the respective correlation between the average start date of the interviewers and the length of the fieldwork period.<sup>11</sup> That means, that for the total length of the fieldwork period it is more important when the interviewers actually start taking interviews than how long they are occupied with the study. In order to reduce the fielding time, it seems to be good advice to put a lot of emphasis on a timely start of all interviewers. Regressing the length of the fieldwork period on the average day of the first interview in ESS Round 1 results in an unstandardized regression coefficient of  $b=2,11$  ( $n=20$ ). That means that every single day the interviewers (on average) start later translates into a two days extension of the whole fieldwork period (see Figure 14).

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11 When we put all four variables (number of interviews per day, percentage of weekend interviews, average start date and average working period of interviewers) into a multiple regression with the length of the fieldwork period as dependent variable, the average start day of the interviewers shows by far the strongest effect ( $B=.59$ ,  $n=20$ ).

**Figure 14** Length of fieldwork period (in days) and average date of first interview (in days) in ESS Round 1



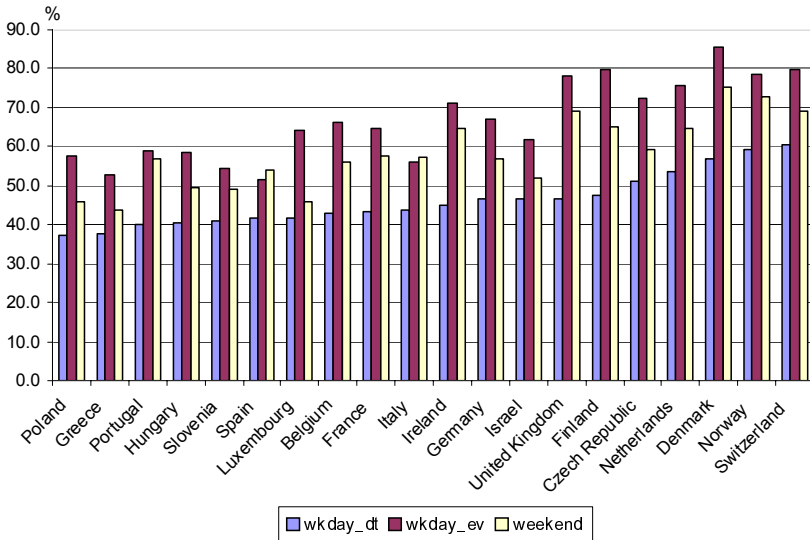
As a matter of course, we should not over-interpret these results. The analyses presented provide some useful hints on factors which can have an effect on fieldwork length, but the relationships we observed should not be taken for granted. First, and foremost we have to recognize that the data we analyzed do not stem from an experimental design, but are based on observations made on the aggregate level of countries. Second, it goes without saying that not only the variables analysed here will have affected the length of the data collection period in a country, but a lot of other factors as well. For instance, the population density and geographic distribution of the respondents, the cooperativeness of the target persons, or specific fieldwork efforts exercised by the survey organisations may have differed across countries, although we could not analyse their effects on the length of the fieldwork period in the present paper. This said we nevertheless believe that the results

we got shed some light on selected factors which may contribute to differences in the length of the fieldwork period across countries. Countries aiming at reducing their fieldwork period should check whether the factors analysed can be utilized to improve the implementation of data collection in future Rounds of ESS.

## 5.2 Timing of interviews and data quality

The timing of interviews can have an effect on data quality. Most textbooks on survey interviewing stress the fact that interviewers should do some of their work in the evenings or at weekends in order to interview people who are at work during the day (Groves et al., 2004: 293f; Hoinville et al., 1985: 107; Weinberg, 1983: 341f). When we use the data from ESS Round 1 and calculate the proportion of respondents who said that they had been in paid work during the last seven days separately for weekday daytime, weekday evening and weekend interviews, we observe strong and significant differences (see Figure 15).

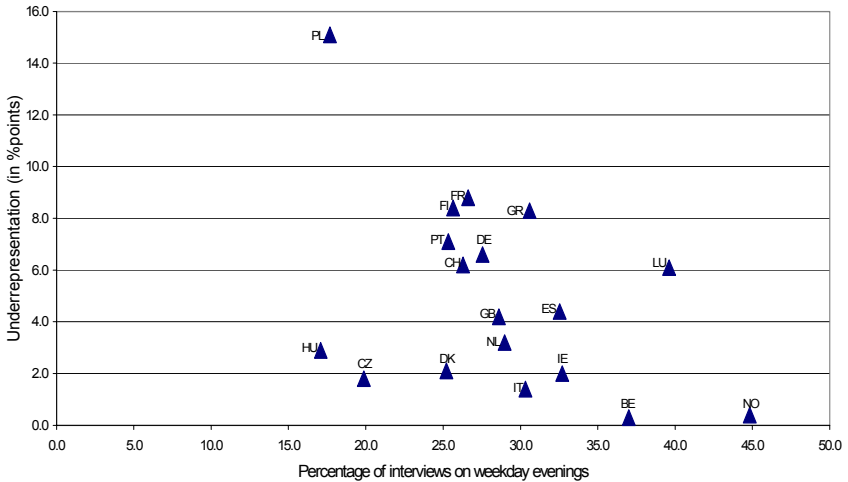
**Figure 15 Percentage of people in paid work in the last 7 days, by time and day of interview, ESS Round 1 (data weighted by DWEIGHT)**



In all countries, interviews made on weekday morning or weekday afternoon show the lowest proportion of people in paid work. In nearly every country, the highest proportion is observed for interviews made in the evening. The percentage of people in paid work is 10 (Spain) to 33 (Finland) percentage points higher for evening than for daytime interviews. Only in Italy and Spain, the proportion is slightly higher for weekend interviews than for evening interviews.

In order to validate the ESS data, we compared the labor force participation rates in the working-age population (15 to 64 years old) of the ESS with available external data. The external information stem from the “European System of Social Indicators” (EUSI, [http://www.geis.org/en/social\\_monitoring/social\\_indicators/index.htm](http://www.geis.org/en/social_monitoring/social_indicators/index.htm)), which used data from Eurostat and the OECD, respectively (Indicator H1122). Information was available for 18 of the 20 ESS countries. No information is provided in EUSI for Israel and Slovenia. According to the EUSI, the labor force participation rates in the ESS countries vary between 60% (Italy and Hungary) and 82% (Switzerland). The proportions of people in paid work last week we receive from the ESS data are lower in all countries. But the differences vary considerably in magnitude across countries. In Belgium and Norway more or less negligible deviations of less than one percentage point were observed. On the other hand, we find differences of eight or nine percentage points for Greece, Finland, and France. The greatest deviation refers to Poland, where the labor force participation rate in ESS is 15 percentage points lower than the figure from EUSI.

**Figure 16 Underrepresentation of people in paid work (in % points) and percentage of interviews completed on weekday evenings, ESS Round 1 (data weighted by DWEIGHT)**



When we compare the magnitude of the deviations with the proportion of interviews realized on weekday daytime, on weekday evening or at weekends, we find only weak evidence for a relationship. The higher the percentage of interviews completed on weekday evenings, the lower the deviation with respect to the labor force participation rate ( $r=-.43$ ,  $n=18$ ; see Figure 16).<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, Poland shows the greatest observed deviation with respect to the proportion of people in paid work (15 percentage points), and the second lowest proportion of weekday evening interviews (18%).<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, the lowest observed deviations pertain to two countries scoring well above average in the percentage of evening interviews: Belgium and Norway.

12 The respective correlations with the percentage of weekday daytime ( $r=-.05$ ) and weekend interviews ( $r=.27$ ) are lower in magnitude.

13 Given the great magnitude of this deviation, it seems worth to check whether other factors than nonresponse errors may have contributed to that bias, for instance differences in the translation of the respective question.

But besides that we have to be aware, that there are a few countries with a low percentage of evening interviews, which nevertheless do not show large deviations with regard to the labor force participation rate. A particularly striking example is Hungary, which exhibits a distribution of interviewing times very similar to that of Poland, but a deviation in the labor force participation rate of only three percentage points. And we have to take into account that the magnitude of the correlation we observed is heavily dependent on the data from Poland. Excluding Poland from the analyses reduces the correlation between the percentage of evening interviews and the underrepresentation of people in paid work to  $r = -.24$  ( $n = 17$ ).

These reservations make clear that a low percentage of interviews made in the evening does not inevitably lead to an underrepresentation of people in paid work in the realised sample. The main issue is, whether interviewers possess the necessary flexibility to complete an interview at a time which suits the preferences of the target person. According to our results, at least in some countries, a low proportion of evening interviews may reflect limited temporal availability of the interviewers, thus leading to an underrepresentation of people in paid work. Countries where this applies should check whether specific rules for the timing of interviews might help to improve the sample composition in future surveys.

For the rest, it is interesting to notice that another commonly used indicator for potential biases of survey results – the nonresponse rate – does not seem to be very indicative of an underrepresentation of people in paid work: In ESS 1, the correlation between the nonresponse rate and the underrepresentation of people in paid work is rather low in size, and it is in the other direction than one would expect ( $r = -.20$ ,  $n = 18$ ; excl. Poland  $r = .03$ ,  $n = 17$ ).

## **6 Conclusion**

The present paper dealt with fieldwork issues in the first Round of the European Social Survey. Besides some basic features of data collection, like the number of interviews achieved or the number of interviewers deployed, several more specific aspects of fieldwork were investigated. These included the average number of interviews the interviewers completed per day, the time and day when interviews were made, the length of the start-up phase until interviewers completed their first interview, and the length of the time period interviewers were actually engaged in realizing interviews. The data presented

revealed differences and similarities in the work of interviewers across countries and provided by this means some insights in the freedom for different designs and implementation of fieldwork. We saw, for example, that

- the number of interviews completed per day was highest in South European countries, like Spain, Portugal or Greece,
- interviewing on weekends was a rather rare event in the Scandinavian countries,
- the time period until interviewers started to realize their first interview, and the length of the interviewers' actual working period differed widely across countries.

As it turned out, these fieldwork patterns can provide clues on how to explain the observed differences in the length of the fieldwork period or differences in sample composition across the ESS countries.

As a next step it could prove to be useful to examine whether the results we found can be replicated in other surveys – either in forthcoming Rounds of ESS or in other cross-national surveys (with the same countries but eventually with different survey organisations). In the present paper the three levels of 'country', 'survey organisation' and 'study' could not be distinguished, since they were perfectly confounded. Replications of the analyses carried out could help to clarify, whether the observed results pertain to stable patterns of fieldwork in particular countries and/or specific fieldwork organisations, or whether the results are more or less idiosyncratic features of the design and implementation of a specific survey.

The replication of the analyses is facilitated by the fact, that only a limited set of variables is needed. The list of variables we used comprises an interviewer identification number, as well as information on the date and start time of the interview. This information can be collected easily in practically every survey. Since we need this information only for respondents, the collection of the data can occur during the interview. Concentrating on information for realized interviews thus has the advantage of minimizing the effort necessary to gain the information. On the other hand, one has to bear in mind that more detailed analyses, for instance on the contact behavior of interviewers and its results, or nonresponse analyses investigating differences between respondents and nonrespondents, will not be feasible with these data. Such research questions require additional measuring instruments, like contact forms for instance (see Phillipens & Billiet, 2004 for an example of analyses based on contact forms data for ESS Round 1).

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